

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9813

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AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BRUSSELS 0726

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, BE

SUBJECT: THE OUTLOOK FIVE WEEKS BEFORE THE BELGIAN ELECTIONS

1. SUMMARY. FIVE WEEKS BEFORE THE NATIONAL
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF MARCH 10, THE EMBASSY
EXPECTS THAT THE OUTCOME WILL INCREASE THE PRESSURES
EXERTED BY THE SOCIALIST PARTY, IN OR OUTSIDE OF A
COALITION, FOR WIDENING THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN
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BELGIAN AFFAIRS. THE ELECTIONS ARE LIKELY TO SHIFT

BELGIUM SLIGHTLY FURTHER TO THE LEFT AND TO STIMULATE INCREASED POLARIZATION AND RIGIDITY IN BELGIAN POLITICAL LIFE. THIS SHIFT WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO CHANGE THE MAIN LINES OF BELGIAN INTERNAL AND FOREIGN POLICIES IN THE SHORT-TERM; BUT THE LONGER-TERM PERSPECTIVES POINT TO INCREASED RELUCTANCE BY THE GOVERNMENT TO IMPOSE SACRIFICES FOR MILITARY STRENGTH, AND TO INCREASED EMPHASIS UPON DETENTE AS THE JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SLACKENING OF THE DEFENSE EFFORT. END SUMMARY.

2. BACKGROUND. ONE OF THE FRENCH AMBASSADORS IN BRUSSELS IS FOND OF SAYING THAT BELGIUM'S SOCIETY IS STILL SET IN THE MOULD OF THE FRANCE OF THE BOURGEOIS MONARCHY OF LOUIS PHILIPPE; THAT POLITICALLY SHE STILL OPERATES ON THE MODEL OF THE FRENCH THIRD REPUBLIC, AND THAT ECONOMICALLY AND TECHNOLOGICALLY SHE HAS ALREADY ENTERED UPON THE 21ST CENTURY. OTHER OBSERVERS CANNOT RESIST COMPARING THE FRAGILITY OF BELGIAN GOVERNMENT COALITIONS WITH THOSE OF THE FOURTH FRENCH REPUBLIC (ALTHOUGH CLOSER COMPARISON IS TO THE BELGIAN ADVANTAGE). IN ANY EVENT, GOVERNMENT BY UNSTABLE COALITION, NORMALLY BY THE BELGIAN SOCIALIST PARTY (PSB) AND THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (PSC/PVV), HAS BEEN THE DOMINANT FEATURE OF THE BELGIAN POLITICAL SCENE FOR THE PAST THIRTY YEARS.

3. AGAINST THIS GENERAL BACKGROUND, MOST OBSERVERS IN BRUSSELS SEE THE NEXT ELECTIONS LEADING INEVITABLY TO A NEW COALITION BETWEEN THE SOCIALISTS AND THE SOCIAL CHRISTIANS, WITH OR WITHOUT LIBERAL PARTY PARTICIPATION, BUT IN ANY EVENT, PAINFULLY BARGAINED. THE SOCIALISTS HAVE MADE IT PERFECTLY CLEAR THAT THEY WILL PARTICIPATE ONLY IN A NEW GOVERNMENT COMMITTED MORE FIRMLY THAN IN THE PAST TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF KEY ELEMENTS OF SOCIALIST PARTY DOCTRINE. A GOVERNMENT WITHOUT THE SOCIALISTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, COULD BE FORMED ONLY ON THE BASIS OF A HIGHLY UNSTABLE COALITION OF SOCIAL CHRISTIANS, LIBERALS, AND FLEMISH AND WALLOON LINGUISTIC/FEDERALIST GROUPS, INEVITABLY HARASSED AND WEAKENED

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BY DEMAGOGUERY FROM THE PSB IN OPPOSITION.

4. TRENDS. THE PRINCIPAL TRENDS WE DISCERN IN BELGIAN POLITICAL LIFE TODAY INCLUDE:

-- AN EROSION OF THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES, AS MEN WITH LEADERSHIP QUALITIES LEAVE THE SCENE AND ARE REPLACED BY NEW MEN, WHO

THOUGH OFTEN MORE EXPERT TECHNICALLY THAN THEIR PREDECESSORS,
STILL HAVE TO VALIDATE THEIR CREDENTIALS AS LEADERS;

-- THE TRANSFORMATION OF WHAT WERE ONCE GREAT
ISSUES OF PRINCIPLE, E.G. CHURCH VS. STATE, OR FREE
ENTERPRISE VS. SOCIALISM, INTO NEW, MORE COMPLEX
ISSUES ARISING FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SETTLEMENTS
THAT WERE BASICALLY COMPROMISES, LEADING TO FRICTIONS
THAT GIVE INCREASED SCOPE TO MORE RADICAL LEADERS,
SUCH AS THOSE NOW ACTIVE IN THE LINGUISTIC/FEDERALIST
GROUPS;

--THE GROWING POLARIZATION AND RADICALIZATION
THAT OCCURS WHEN ONE GROUP, E.G. THE SOCIALIST PARTY
IN WALLONIA, FINDS IT EXPEDIENT TO SHARPEN ITS
DOCTRINAIRE POLICIES, AND THEREBY STIMULATES A MORE
DOCTRINAIRE RESISTANCE BY ANOTHER GROUP, E.G. THE
FLEMISH CATHOLICS.

5. THE PARTIES. THE CHARACTER OF THE NEXT BELGIAN
COALITION GOVERNMENT WILL BE DETERMINED BY THE ELECTORAL
PERFORMANCE OF THREE POLITICAL GROUPS:

--THE SOCIALIST PARTY (PSB) WHICH IS NOW AND
WILL CONTINUE TO BE, IN EFFECT, THE STRONGEST SINGLE PARTY EVEN
THOUGH IT HAS OCCUPIED ONLY 61 OF THE 212 SEATS IN
THE BELGIAN CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES;

--THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN (CATHOLIC OR CHRISTIAN
DEMOCRATIC) PARTY, THE WALLONIAN BRANCH OF WHICH (PSC)
HAS OCCUPIED 16 SEATS AND THE FLEMISH BRANCH (CVP)
43 SEATS, FOR A TOTAL, INCLUDING AN ADDITIONAL 8
DEPUTIES FROM THE BRUSSELS REGION, OF 67 SEATS; DESPITE
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THIS NUMERICAL SUPERIORITY OVER THE PSB, THE UNBALANCED
DIVISION BETWEEN FLANDERS AND WALLONIA, AND DOCTRINAL
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO BRANCHES, LEAVE THE SOCIAL
CHRISTIANS WEAKER THAN THE MORE DISCIPLINED SOCIALISTS;

-- "THE OTHER PARTIES" NOTABLY THE FREE ENTERPRISE
LIBERALS (PLP/PVV AND PLDP); THE SO-CALLED FEDERALIST
OR LINGUISTIC GROUPS, THE FRANCOPHONE FRONT/WALLONIAN
ASSEMBLY (FDF/RW) AND THE FLEMISH VOLKSUNIE WITH 45
SEATS IN THE LAST CHAMBER; AND FINALLY THE BELGIAN
COMMUNIST PARTY, WITH ITS FIVE DEPUTIES.

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ACTION EUR-25

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BRUSSELS 0726

6. ELECTION ISSUES. THE CRISIS THAT BROUGHT DOWN THE LEBURTON GOVERNMENT JANUARY 18 WAS A POLITICAL, NOT A POPULAR CRISIS. NEITHER THE ISSUE OF INTRODUCING A STATE ENTERPRISE (IBRAMCO) INTO THE ENERGY SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY, INVOKED BY THE PSB, NOR ANY OF THE VARIOUS ISSUES THAT WERE LEFT IN A STATE OF IMPASSE BY BELGIUM'S POLITICAL PARTIES DURING THE PAST YEAR, ARE MATTERS OF CURRENT BURNING CONCERN TO THE BELGIAN ELECTORATE. THE COMMON POPULAR ATTITUDE IS ONE OF
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RESENTMENT AT HAVING TO BOTHER WITH AND PAY FOR
EARLY ELECTIONS, WHEN THE REGULARLY-SCHEDULED
CONSULTATION IN MAY 1975 WOULD HAVE BEEN QUITE ACCEPTABLE.

7. RATHER THAN CAMPAIGNING DEFENSIVELY ON THE BASIS
OF ITS LACKLUSTER RECORD AS THE LEADING PARTY IN
THE LEBURTON GOVERNMENT, THE PSB WILL TRY TO
STRENGTHEN ITSELF IDEOLOGICALLY BY STRESSING THE
CAMPAIGN ISSUE OF INCREASED STATE CONTROL IN A
PLURALISTIC SOCIETY, AND A DIRECT ROLE FOR THE STATE
IN THE ENERGY SECTOR AND OTHER KEY SECTORS.

8. OTHER PRINCIPAL ISSUES IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN
ARE ISSUES OF LONG STANDING, EARLIER SETTLEMENTS OF
WHICH HAVE PROVED IMPOSSIBLE TO IMPLEMENT, OR ARE
AGAIN BEING QUESTIONED IN NEW CIRCUMSTANCES. THESE
INCLUDE:

-- REGIONALIZATION, THE POPULAR WORD FOR THE
DEVISING OF NEW INSTITUTIONS OF DECENTRALIZED GOVERNMENT,
SUCH AS CULTURAL COUNCILS AND REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES, AND
INCLUDING THE RELATED CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL
ISSUE OF WHETHER EFFECTIVE DECENTRALIZATION REQUIRES
AMENDING THE BELGIAN CONSTITUTION;

-- THE SCHOOL PACT, A TERM COVERING THE
RE-NEGOTIATION OF A PACT CONCLUDED 10 YEARS AGO ON
THE FINANCING OF STATE AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS, NOW
COMPLICATED BY NEW PROPOSALS FOR A MORE "PLURALISTIC"
APPROACH TO EDUCATION (TO BRING PAROCHIAL AND PUBLIC
EDUCATION TOGETHER UNDER ONE ROOF);

-- ABORTION, I.E. THE DESIRE OF THE PSB TO
CHANGE BELGIAN LEGISLATION TO ELIMINATE LEGAL SANCTIONS
AGAINST ABORTION, AGAINST THE RESISTANCE OF THE
CATHOLIC PARTIES.

9. OTHER NARROWER ISSUES THAT WILL BE TAKEN INTO
ACCOUNT IN PARTY PLATFORMS INCLUDE:

-- CLEAN GOVERNMENT, AN ISSUE IN WHICH SOCIAL
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CHRISTIAN ATTACKS ON THE PSB FOR SCANDALS IN THE
AWARDING OF CONTRACTS BY THE STATE TELECOMMUNICATIONS
MONOPOLY (RTT) UNDER MINISTER ANSEELE WILL BE COUNTERED
BY SOCIALIST ATTACKS ON LINKS BETWEEN THE FLEMISH
SOCIAL CHRISTIAN (CVP) LEADER DE SAEGER AND BELGIUM'S

LEADING CONSTRUCTION TYCOON;

-- MILITARY SERVICE REFORM, AN ISSUE ON WHICH THE GOVERNMENT WAS ATTACKED WHEN IT TRIED TO END DRAFT EXEMPTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS; THE GOVERNMENT IS ALSO ASSAILED BY THE FAR LEFT FOR HAVING ESTABLISHED THE GOAL OF A LARGELY PROFESSIONAL ARMY BY 1978, WHEN THE PERIOD OF CONSCRIPT SERVICE IS TO HAVE BEEN REDUCED FROM THE CURRENT 12/15 MONTHS TO 6 MONTHS.

10. KEY PERSONALITIES. IN TODAY'S PERSPECTIVE, THE LEADING CANDIDATES TO REPLACE LEBURTON AS PRIME MINISTER AFTER THE MARCH 10 ELECTIONS ARE (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER) WILLY CLAES OR ANDRE COOLS (PSB), AND LEO TINDEMANS (CVP). ALTERNATE CANDIDATES FOR THE PRIME MINISTERSHIP OR FOR KEY MINISTERIES INCLUDE HENRI SIMONET (PSB), PAUL VANDEN BOEYNANTS (PSC), WILLY DE CLERCQ (PLP), AND RENAAT VAN ELSLANDE (CVP), WHO IS LIKELY TO BE REAPPOINTED FOREIGN MINISTER.

11. SOURCES. BEFORE PREPARING THIS APPRAISAL, WE INTERVIEWED LEADERS FROM ACROSS THE SPECTRUM OF THE BELGIAN POLITICAL PARTIES, INCLUDING GASTON EYSKENS, LEBURTON'S PREDECESSOR AS PRIME MINISTER, MINISTER OF DEFENSE PAUL VANDEN BOEYNANTS, VICE PREMIER LEO TINDEMANS, PSB LEADER ANDRE COOLS, PSC LEADER CHARLES NOTHOMB, FDF LEADER ANDRE LAGASSE, ECONOMICS MINISTER WILLY CLAES, VICE PRIME MINISTER WILLY DE CLERCQ, EEC COMMISSIONER (AND PSB PERSONALITY) HENRI SIMONET, FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS, PARTY FUNCTIONARIES, PARLIAMENTARIANS, TRADE UNION LEADERS, AND POLITICAL EDITORS OF BELGIAN NEWSPAPERS.

12. CONCLUSIONS. DESPITE THOSE WHO ASK WITH INCREASED INSISTENCE WHETHER THE TRADITIONAL BELGIAN ABILITY TO REACH COMPROMISE SOLUTIONS IS BECOMING A THING OF CONFIDENTIAL

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THE PAST, THE EMBASSY BELIEVES THAT ENOUGH OF THIS ABILITY PERSISTS EVEN IN THE YOUNGER GENERATION TO ASSURE THE MAINTENANCE OF STABILITY -- THE STABILITY OF FREQUENTLY CHANGING COALITIONS ALWAYS RETURNING TO THE SAME CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC-SOCIALIST TANDEM. THE UNITED STATES HAS FRIENDS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN. THE KING HAS SHOWN HIMSELF TO BE AN INTELLIGENT AND EFFECTIVE MODERATING FORCE. IF WE EXPECT GREATER DIFFICULTIES FOR POLICIES REQUIRING AN APPROPRIATE BELGIAN EFFORT AT MILITARY PREPAREDNESS, OUR CONCERN ARISES ONLY PARTLY FROM BELGIAN SOCIALIST PARTY OPPORTUNISM AND AT LEAST EQUALLY FROM BROADER

TRENDS ARISING FROM NUCLEAR STALEMATE AND DETENTE.
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